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RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY 0962  
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO PRIORITY 3765  
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RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV PRIORITY 2251  
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RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY  
RUCPDO/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC PRIORITY  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000849

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [ETRD](#) [PGOV](#) [EU](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: SARG FAST-TRACKING EU ASSOCIATION AGREEMENT

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4(b,d)

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) An EU diplomat in Damascus confirmed that a delegation would travel to Damascus to publicly "initial" the EU Association Agreement with Syria on December 14, following the successful conclusion of negotiations to update the agreement text on November 24 in Brussels. In her view, President Asad had empowered the Syrian negotiating team to quickly conclude the negotiations in order to strengthen Syria's position vis-a-vis Europe before the U.S. presidential inauguration. She doubted that the 27 EU member states could ratify the agreement so quickly, but assessed that recent high-level SARG visits to European capitals had been successful in persuading skeptics, such as the Netherlands, to support the Syrian position. In her opinion, the only political obstacle that might yet derail the agreement would be additional IAEA criticism of the SARG's nuclear program. End summary.

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SARG Can "Get to Yes" When They Want To  
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¶2. (C) EU Political and Economic Section Chief Angelina Eichhorst (protect) confirmed that a delegation from the EU would be traveling to Damascus to publicly "initial" the EU Association Agreement with Syria on December 14. This step comes after the November 24 conclusion of negotiations in Brussels to update the agreement's text since previous negotiations had stalled in 2004. Eichhorst told us that EU and Syrian negotiating teams had been working "in parallel" on possible amendments for "weeks," and said that the Syrian delegation had worked "day and night" to finish its position in the final days before going to Brussels. Once the negotiations began, the EU team was surprised that the Syrians had not presented detailed demands -- particularly regarding agriculture and tariff structures. The SARG team had instead pursued a strategy of updating only specific technical language while addressing all other subjects as simply and broadly as possible.

¶3. (C) Eichhorst said that the pace of the negotiations had also exceeded the EU's expectations. In her opinion, the

SARG had helped speed the process by including in its 14-member delegation both currently empowered decisionmakers (such as delegation head DPM Abdullah Dardari and State Planning Commission Head Tayssir Raddawy) and almost exactly the same drafters that had worked on the original text from 2000-2004. Consequently -- and in her opinion, uncharacteristically -- the Syrian team rarely consulted with Damascus before agreeing to amendments.

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Timing Tied to Transition  
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¶4. (C) To Eichhorst, the Syrian team's behavior indicated that President Asad wanted to conclude the agreement as quickly as possible in order to present it to the incoming Obama Administration as evidence that the EU has given Syria a "clean bill of health." She suggested that the SARG may also benefit from the transition of political power within the EU, as many new parliaments and governments with no background on Syria may also take office in early 2009. She posited that it was unlikely the 27 EU member states could ratify the agreement before the U.S. presidential inauguration, however, as the EU would adjourn on December 19 for a lengthy holiday break. When the EU reconvenes in 2009, she said, the Czechs may not want to tackle such a difficult issue as Syria so early in their first EU Presidency, but that French President Sarkozy would be likely to push them to move forward.

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EU Members Likely to Ratify  
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¶5. (C) According to Eichhorst, once the Czechs place Syria's Association Agreement on the EU agenda, the member states' foreign ministers may choose one of three courses of action. First, and in her opinion least likely, they could demand specific amendments to the text and send it back to the negotiating teams. Next, and she believes most likely, they will vote to sign the agreement as negotiated. Finally, the foreign ministers could stall the agreement by calling for additional "political debate" over issues such as human rights or Syria's non-cooperation with the IAEA.

¶6. (C) She pointed out that the SARG could preempt the human rights argument by releasing Michel Kilo at any time, as he has already served the mandatory two-thirds of his three-year sentence, which ends in May 2009. In her opinion, European suspicion over Syria's nuclear program is the only remaining obstacle that might still derail the agreement's conclusion, particularly if the IAEA makes any additional public statements regarding Syrian non-compliance.

¶7. (C) Eichhorst remarked that the SARG had successfully persuaded some key EU member states that Syria is deserving of the agreement. She pointed to FM Muallem's "successful" visit to the UK -- reciprocated last week by British FM Miliband in Damascus -- as well as DPM Dardari's recent travels to Athens and Prague. She specifically mentioned the Syrians' success in "flipping" the Netherlands to supporting the agreement, although she did not elaborate on what the Syrians had done to change the Dutch position.

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Comment  
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¶8. (C) The SARG will champion the EU Association Agreement as another example of European engagement -- along with the visits of French President Sarkozy and British Foreign Minister Miliband -- resulting from Syria's agreement to establish diplomatic relations with Lebanon and continuation of indirect peace negotiations with Israel. The SARG may

also believe that EU leaders will pressure the incoming Obama Administration to similarly modify U.S. policy toward Syria. As Syria had already liberalized many of its trade and customs policies since 2004 to comply with WTO standards, the agreement will have little economic impact other than qualifying Syria to receive greater European development assistance. In the long run, however, the SARG may find the two protocols (on human rights and non-proliferation of WMD) far more troublesome than any economic restructuring requirements would have been.

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